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Masters of purple clay

By ZHANG KUN

Whether your favourite tea tippie is coloured green or black, the receptacle that is perfect for pouring it from may well be purple or some other colour.

For such are the colour of the teapots produced in the city of Yixing, Jiangsu province, known all over China for the production of exquisite ceramic ware.

Thousands of craftsmen and craftswomen make these unglazed ceramic teapots, known as Zisha pots, in studios, factories and boutiques throughout the city.

No one seems to know exactly how many teapots and cups are produced in Yixing, but in any case it is often a figure of a very different kind relating to this purple ware that makes the headlines in China: its price. At an auction in Beijing in 2015, for example, a 10-piece purple clay tea set made by the artisan Gu Jingzhou set a record for the price of such art, fetching 92m yuan (\$14.3m).

Made from clay taken from rock mines, Yixing purple clay teapots, named after their signature colour, are largely handmade.

Craftspeople spend years learning to press wet clay into a perfect flat piece, before turning it into a pot. The few tools they use include spatulas, small hammers and needles made of bamboo, wood or steel.

Yixing, more than 2,000 years old, is in the centre of the Yangtze River Delta, on the western bank of Taihu Lake. It has a rich cultural heritage, nurturing many renowned academics, authors and artists, and became a ceramics centre 600 years ago.

That was with the founding of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), said Zhou Xiaodong, director of the Yixing Ceramics Museum.

The first Ming emperor made Nanjing the dynasty's capital, and the ambitious new rulers began building up the economies, especially in nearby cities such as Yixing. The city began to specialise in producing pottery and ceramics, at first to meet burgeoning demand from the capital.

In the same period Chinese people changed the way they drank tea, Mr Zhou said.

"Hard-pressed tea was replaced by loose leaves, and people no longer boiled the tea on the stove, but simply poured hot water into the pot and let it brew."

The teapot thus took on greater significance in China's tea drinking culture, and artisans in Yixing began to make names for themselves with their creations.

"The special mineral combination of Yixing clay makes the ceramic surface look grainy, but it feels smooth," Mr Zhou said.

After the clay is baked it becomes waterproof ceramic, but is porous, allowing air in. This helps to maintain the aroma of Chinese tea, and it keeps its colour and taste for a long time.

"For centuries tea drinking has been an important part of Chinese culture," Mr Zhou said.

Today there are 30 master artisans in Yixing who have been granted the title of national master of purple clay art, and more than 100 craftspeople have been recognised as "masters of Jiangsu province".

One of them is Fan Weiqun, 51, the fourth generation in a family of purple clay craftsmen, whose studio is in the same building as Dasheng Art Museum, where the products of his forebears are on display.

When Mr Fan was a child the handicraft of teapot making had more or less been forgotten in the family, he said. Only one pot had survived and "we saw it only during Lunar New Year, when my father would use it to make tea", he said.

In 1984 Mr Fan's parents agreed to lend that heirloom teapot to the Yixing purple clay factory, whose director paid back the favour by recruiting the young man to work as a young apprentice.

"It was the right time, the first few years of China's reform and opening-up," Mr Fan said.

"Soon wealthy customers from Hong Kong and Taiwan were coming to the city and ordering purple clay teapots and paying as much as hundreds and even tens of thousands of yuan."

Then came purple clay aficionados from other countries such as South Korea and Japan, who have the same cultural thirst for the tea drinking tradition.

This increasing new demand inspired Yixing to put an effort into developing its purple clay industry. Senior artisans and master artists were invited to train young workers, and special workshops were set up to produce objects for export.

While teapot making is still handiwork, Mr Fan and other artisans are ready to use the latest technology in their work.

"These can help you have a better perception of the dimensions and forms before they were made into clay," he said. "The practice, heritage and skills are never lost."



Purple clay teapots are hand-sculpted by craftspeople. GAO ERQIANG / CHINA DAILY



Left: Customers wait at an All Things Renew outlet in Shanghai to recycle their goods. DING LEI / FOR CHINA DAILY **Right:** A consumer (right) checks out recycled mobile phones at an All Things Renew phone recycling station in Shanghai in October. REN YUMING / FOR CHINA DAILY



Buying used goods a growing phenomenon

Recycling economy becomes a big hit among the environmentally conscious

By FAN FEIFEI

Wang Hao, 27, an engineer with a software company in Beijing, is a pen aficionado. He usually buys and sells the writing instruments on Xianyu, a popular customer-to-customer platform in China for trading secondhand goods run by Alibaba Group.

"I love collecting various types of pens with unique designs and excellent workmanship, such as Lamy, Montblanc, Parker, Sailor, Duke and Hero," Mr Wang said. "The new ones are often very expensive, and I just use them for a short time and then switch to another."

Buying used pens through online secondhand e-commerce platforms can save a lot of money, he said, adding that the products can more easily reach new owners, while sellers can get extra income.

Mr Wang is among Chinese increasingly concerned about environmental issues. Rather than shunning used goods, these people are looking for high-quality affordable products on second-hand platforms.

China's secondhand goods market continues to thrive. It had revenue of 740bn yuan (\$115bn)

in 2018, 30 per cent more than in the previous year, according to a report by the market research company AskCI Consulting Co of Shenzhen. The figure was estimated to reach 1tn yuan in 2020.

More than 1m users advertise more than 2m used goods daily on Xianyu, ranging from apparel, shoes, smartphones, cosmetics, maternal and baby products to furniture and home appliances.

Xianyu, established in 2014, has become one of the largest online trading platforms for used goods in China. The company said its gross merchandise volume surpassed 200bn yuan in 2019 and its online sellers reached 30m, with those under the age of 30 accounting for more than 60 per cent. It says it has 90m monthly active users.

There is huge potential in various sectors of the second-hand market. Recycling of smartphones and electronic items, for example, represents a vast market. The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology said that about 524m mobile phones may have been discarded last year, but only 2 per cent of them were recycled using regular channels.

Online platforms provide users with a recycling channel and transparent pricing structures that are more stable and reliable than those offered by street vendors who deal in mobile phone recycling.

The Chinese online electronics recycling plat-

form All Things Renew, formally known as Aihuishou, announced it had completed more than \$100m in a series of E+ round of financing, which was jointly led by the e-commerce company JD and Guotai Junan International Holdings.

The company, established in 2011, specialises in recycling and trading secondhand electronic goods, such as cameras, phones and laptops. It has opened more than 700 physical shops in 140 cities, with the daily trading volume of computers, consumer electronics and communication products exceeding 70,000 units.

"We will strengthen in-depth omnichannel collaboration with JD and seize opportunities arising from upgrades to 5G mobile phones," said Chen Xuefeng, founder and chief executive of All Things Renew. "In addition, we will accelerate our layout in the business-to-consumer segment to upgrade our business model."

The market research firm IDC said global shipments of secondhand smartphones totaled 206.7m units in 2019, compared with 175.8m in 2018.

The used smartphone market continues to rise and shows no signs of slowing down across all parts of the globe, it said, with shipments expected to grow to 333m units by 2023, compound annual growth reaching 13.6 per cent.

Mo Daiqing, a senior analyst at the Internet

1 trillion yuan
estimated revenue of China's secondhand goods market in 2020

On culture, museums and cash cows

By XU LIN

Chen Xiao bought a canvas bag online from the National Museum of China in Beijing, printed with three characters from an ancient painting at the museum. The way they are displayed on the bag, with its colourful straps integrated into the graphic design, the three figures appear as if they are playing with a skipping rope. It is one of the museum's popular creative cultural products.

More people, like Ms Chen, are buying such products, either for daily use or as souvenirs.

"Traditional culture contains many beautiful elements that seem far-removed from our life, but such products connect our complex desire and need to connect with the past," said Ms Chen, a Beijing office worker. "It's just like a bridge."

In August 2019 Tsinghua University and the business-to-customer platform Tmall published a report about the purchase of creative cultural products. The number of online visits to museums' flagship shops on Tmall was 1.6bn in the year to June that year, one and a half times the number of physical visits to museums, the report said.

Of those who bought museum products at least three times in that period, more than half were born in the 1990s and 2000s. From July 2018 to June 2019, sales of such museum products on Alibaba platforms tripled compared with sales from July 2016 to June 2017. Most were daily-use items, necessities, cosmetics and snacks.

Many Chinese museums have won over shoppers through innovation and continuously upgrading their products.

The late Chinese-American architect Ieoh Ming Pei designed the new Suzhou Museum in Jiangsu province that opened in 2006. It soon became a city landmark.

Last year the museum produced a series of products with quotes from Pei, printed in Chinese and English, in commemoration of the first anniversary of his death. The design team, before developing the final creations, had read Pei's books and watched hours of interview videos in order to select 56 of his key observations about architecture and life.

The museum also owns a 480-year-old Chinese wisteria, planted by the painter and calligrapher Wen Zhengming (1470-1559) of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Since 2013 the museum has sold seeds of it for buyers to plant. One thousand boxes, each of which hold three seeds, are available every year.

To design good products, said Jiang Han, head of the museum's creative cultural products business, one needs to "have passion for the job, un-



Clockwise from left: Suzhou Museum's mooncakes, packaged with designs of woodblock prints. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY Suzhou Museum's drinking set designed to warm wine, printed with part of a painting by Wen Zhengming, a scholar-artist from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY The Palace Museum's pocket watch, inspired by the 24 divisions of the solar year in the Chinese lunar calendar. XU LIN / CHINA DAILY

derstand deeply the museum's exhibits and their history, and have an insight into the industry".

In 2018, when the museum opened its official online store on Tmall, the number of annual visits quickly surpassed those to the museum itself.

In 2019 online sales accounted for a third of the total, and in 2020 about half.

"The pandemic has affected our physical stores, with a series of chain reactions," Ms Jiang said. "Our current development of new products is more focused on online platforms."

Since the beginning of last year more than 100 museums, galleries, scenic spots and culture and tourism institutions have opened online stores on Taobao and Tmall, Alibaba Group's e-commerce platforms, about 80 per cent of which are domestic museums.

The most popular museum stores on Tmall include the Palace Museum in Beijing, the British Museum, the National Museum of China, Dunhuang Academy and Shaanxi History Museum.



The value of creative cultural products is not about their popularity or profit, but that they serve as a bridge for museums to converse with the public."

Liu Xiaobo, co-founder of the Beijing BES Cultural Creative Development Co

of the Beijing BES Cultural Creative Development Co, which has provided services pertaining to such products to scenic spots and museums.

"These creative cultural products cater to the core demands of consumers," Mr Liu said. "Some even offer interactive experiences, and end up being topics of conversation."

He cites the example of "blind boxes" produced and sold by Henan Museum in Zhengzhou, Henan province. It fulfills the customer's dream of becoming an amateur archaeologist, simply by digging into a clod of earth with a small shovel and a brush, to discover replica treasures inside.

They sold out several times in early December after someone told of their excavation on the internet.

"The primary goal of museums is to collect objects and present them to the public for the purpose of education," Mr Liu said.

"The value of creative cultural products is not about their popularity or profit, but that they serve as a bridge for museums to converse with the public."

He cites the Palace Museum as a good example. The museum, also known as the Forbidden City, was China's imperial palace from 1420 to 1911 and used to be forbidden to commoners in feudal times. Now it successfully promotes its culture and tells its stories vividly through its various creative cultural products.

"The success of the Palace Museum helped to propel the development of creative cultural products, with more museums riding the wave in recent years," Mr Liu said.

When he first entered the industry more than 10 years ago it was hard to explain to people the definition of such products, let alone their benefits, he said, whereas today, generally no explanation is needed.

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